



Caring

Children and mental health Aetna Resources For LivingSM

When you think about providing for your children, what comes to mind? Food, shelter, clothing and medical care? What about mental and emotional care? These are just as critical to a child's well-being.

Recent studies show that one in seven U.S. kids has a mental health disorder. And half of kids with such issues never get help or treatment.¹

What causes mental health problems in kids and teens?

Mental health problems can arise from hereditary and environmental factors as well as illness or injury. While there's no such thing as a "perfect" childhood, a chaotic or dysfunctional home can certainly contribute to problems. Experiencing trauma is another likely trigger.

What do children need to be mentally and emotionally healthy?

Children can best cope and thrive when they have:

- Unconditional love from their family
- Security and stability
- Self-esteem and self-confidence
- Time to play and socialize with other kids
- Caring, positive teachers, caregivers and role models
- Consistent support, guidance and discipline

¹[Recognizing mental health problems in children](#). Mental health America. Accessed April 2019.



What are signs of mental health distress in kids?

As kids grow up, they go through many developmental stages. Some may include mood and behavior variations. For example, teens might be especially moody at times due to hormonal changes.

This can make it harder to tell whether a child or teen is acting “normal” or not. Often, that’s a judgment based on how long a new behavior lasts and how much it impairs or impacts their everyday lives.

Children who are suffering from mental health issues often have symptoms like:

- Falling grades
- Unwillingness to go to school or join in activities
- Frequent nightmares and sleep problems
- Ongoing worry or anxiety
- Uncharacteristic acting out, disobedience or tantrums
- Restlessness or hyperactivity
- Depression, sadness or anger
- Trouble in multiple areas (home and school)

How can parents help meet kids’ mental health needs?

Parents can help build emotional strength by:

- **Encouraging their kids.** Parents should celebrate their kids when they try new and challenging things. It shows you support their efforts to grow. And it helps build self-confidence and self-esteem.
- **Giving genuine praise.** Kids need praise not just for winning or bringing home straight A’s, but for trying. On the other hand, gushing over every little thing — like when kids brush their teeth or do other routine things — can give them a false sense of accomplishment. The key is to praise often and honestly.
- **Letting kids experience failure.** No one enjoys seeing their kids fail. Yet, if they never fail, how can kids learn to bounce back and try again? Some parents try to engineer their children’s lives so they only have successes. But that’s not reality. And it doesn’t help build resilience — one of the keys to social and emotional stability.
- **Helping kids learn to cope with problems.** Parents should act as role models for mentally healthy ways to deal with disappointment and failure. They should also try to be available if their kids need to talk. Sometimes kids need to vent, share things with parents or simply get hugs.
- **Encouraging friendships.** Children need to connect with other children. When they play with peers, they learn how to socialize, share and be part of a group.

What tools and methods can kids use to help themselves?

There are many ways kids can help themselves through a bout of sadness, frustration or loss. Here are just a few ideas kids can try:

- **Share their feelings.** Talk to a trusted adult.
- **Write their feelings down.** Write a story, letter or journal about them. No one has to read them, so they can be open and honest.
- **Draw, color or paint their feelings.** Express feelings through art.
- **Watch a funny movie or video.** Distraction helps many people cool down or feel better.
- **Play with an animal.** Pets give unconditional love and are fun companions.
- **Get active.** Go outside and shoot baskets, take a bike ride or just walk.
- **Get busy with a hobby.** Hobbies can be fun, interesting and absorbing.
- **Read.** Readers of all ages find that books engage their imaginations and transport them to new places.

Coping skills like these can help with upsets that occur from time to time. However, for chronic or more serious mental health issues, self-help steps are not enough. That’s when professional help is needed.





When and how to get help

The first people to notice shifts in a child's emotions and behaviors are usually parents, teachers and other caregivers. It's good for these adults to have open communication so they can share observations and concerns.

It's a fact that children go through developmental stages and adjustment issues that can cause mood and behavior changes. But if you sense something that seems different, more intense or continues for too long, it may require attention.

If you think your child may have an emotional or mental health problem, contact his or her pediatrician. Talk over your concerns or ask your doctor for a referral to a mental health professional who works with children.

Always take self-destructive behavior or threats seriously

Kids are impulsive. If children talk about hurting or killing others or themselves, act immediately. Call your doctor, the police or go to the ER.

Remember, physical and mental health are equal parts of good health. Both are critical for overall well-being.

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